



Home 'Drome

The walk of shame and ensuing embarrassment the next day were just the beginning of an humbling and prolonged process of investigation and ultimate forgiveness.

Anonymous

It was a beautiful night at NAS Pensacola, and I was scheduled for what we now call a “dual night contact” flight. For these flights, I go out and get the student navigator (SNAV) some stick time doing a turn pattern or maybe a level speed change. I then let them see the importance of frequent glances at the attitude indicator before we come back for the terminal work.

The night was very dark, as I shared the pattern with another T-34C. I had requested an Aldis-lamp demonstration on our last several passes before asking for full stop. The other T-34C had an experienced squadron-mate at the controls, and he nicely was tucked in behind me in the pattern. He also had taken advantage of the helpful controller’s willingness to pull down the light gun and shoot off some photons. We had a great night for training, with very experienced members in both planes—excluding the SNAVs in the front seat and tower.

It was no big deal when I announced, coming into

the 180, we’d be making this one a full stop, and the instructor pilot (IP) behind us told the local controller he’d also be full stop. I let the student go through the procedures and bring us around into the groove. I then took the controls and uneventfully touched down on centerline within the first 1,500 feet of the 8,000-foot runway. What happened next was completely inexcusable and due solely to complacency.

The local controller asked us to expedite for the traffic following us. I replied, “No problem,” as I turned the aircraft nose right of centerline, toward the break in the lights I thought was D taxiway [see airport diagram on next page].

The next exit opportunity would have been A3, located approximately two-thirds down the runway. Usually, the T-34C could—if landed on speed, on centerline and in the first third of the runway—easily exit onto D and taxi via A back to the ramp.



The break in the runway lights actually was the runway intersection and was a shortcoming of the runway-lighting system installed on 07R. Although high-intensity runway lights (HIRLs) were installed on runways 07L and R, the lights on 07L apparently were installed to a newer standard and in such a way they were continuous (using recessed lighting) through all intersecting runways and taxiways. The lights on 07R were not. As a result of my actions and lack of SA, I aimed a couple of degrees too far right and didn't correct, and as I searched for the blue lights of taxiway D from the back seat of the Turbo-Mentor, we went off the runway just east of the intersection of 1/19 and 07R.

I was so complacent after roughly 1,500 hours and three years of operating at NAS Pensacola that I thought I knew the airfield like the back of my hand. By the time the thought, "Where are the taxiway lights I should be seeing?" finished forming as a coherent

question, we rapidly were decelerating to zero as we plowed through the loose topsoil right of the runway. We stopped with the engine running. The power-control lever (PCL) was at idle by the time I answered my own question and had uttered a few choice words.

I quickly told tower we were off the runway, and tower replied, "Roger."

I responded, "No, we're off the runway. We went off the side. I'm in the dirt!"

I went through the procedures. After killing the engine with the condition lever, which cuts off fuel at the fuel-control unit, I had the student pull the emergency-firewall-shutoff handle (T-handle) in the front cockpit. That action kills fuel supply at the firewall. Just to be sure nothing was missed, we broke out the pocket checklist and double-checked we had crossed the T's and dotted the I's. We then unstrapped and got down on the left side. While doing this, I fired up my cellphone and called the duty office to activate the premishap plan. I then looked at the plane to assess the damage.

I didn't see any damage. As I walked around the rear and continued to the right side of the plane, I could see we hadn't hit anything. I had missed the HIRLs (I had aimed well for the break in the lights) and hadn't gone far enough to hit taxiway lights on B. I checked out the front—no damage.

Walking back the way I had come, I could see, in the darkness, an unlit runway-remaining marker. I paced it out; our right wing had missed it by less than seven paces.

I phoned the duty office from my cellphone to tell them all was well with the plane and then got the CO's home number to let him know.

After an initial meeting with the CO and XO, it was off to the Navy hospital for blood tests for my student and me. Afterward, the CO told me to call it a night (it was after midnight), and he'd see me in the morning. The walk of shame and ensuing embarrassment the next day were just the beginning of an humbling and prolonged process of investigation and ultimate forgiveness.

At the time of need, where was the student in the front seat, you ask? Head down, flipping pages on his bluebrains to be ready with the checklist once we got off the runway.

My complacency and lack of SA had gotten us right of centerline, and the SNAV's complacency had him heads down and unaware. By good fortune, only our egos were bruised—mine especially. I got to learn a lesson the easy way: without blood. 🦅